RAJYA SABHA

hursday, the 19th December, 2002/28 Agrahayana, 1924 (Saka)

The House met at eleven of the clock,

MR. CHAIRMAN in the Chair.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Collection of dues from Dolphin consumers

421. SHRI V.V. RAGHAVAN: Will the Minister of COMMUNICATIONS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the MTNL's mobile service Dolphin cons owe more than Rs. 10 crores to MTNL;

(b) if so, the details thereof and the reasons therefor; and

(c) what steps are being taken to ensure regular collection of charges he consumers?

THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION HNOLOGY (SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN): (a) to (c) A Statement is n the Table of the House.

Statement

(a) and (b) Approximately Rs. 20.64 crores are outstanding against . Cellular Customers in Delhi and about Rs. 21.32 crores are outing against the Cellular Customers in Mumbai.

Due to some technical snags in the billing system, the bills for the d from January—March, 2002 could not be issued on time. However, he system has been streamlined and bills are being issued regularly.

(c) The following steps have been taken to ensure the regular tion:

(i) Monthly bills are being issued on time.

(ii) MTNL Mobile units of Delhi and Mumbai have hired the services of private agencies to collect the outstanding dues on their behalf.

(iii) Notices are being issued to the defaulters.

SHRI V. V. RAGHAVAN: Hon. Chairman, Sir, the hon. Minister in his reply has stated that MTNL in Delhi and Mumbai have had private agencies to collect the outstanding dues for the Dolphin services. Is it a first step to privatise the public sector unit while the MTNL itself takes steps against the defaulters?

SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN: Sir, as far as MTNL's privatisation is concerned, this is neither first step nor last step. As I said, last time, last week on the same day, Government has no proposal to privatise MTNL or to disinvest beyond what is already disinvested in MTNL. As far as hiring the private agency is concerned, Sir, hon. Member must be concerned, and I am also concerned that against the bills which were submitted to the customers, the MTNL's normal system could not recover the dues from the customers and a large number of defaulters are there. So, hiring some agency to get money from defaulters, in no way, can be construed as privatisation. So, I again assure the hon. Members that, in the near future, we have no proposal for privatisation of MTNL.

SHRI V. V. RAGHAVAN: Sir, may I know from the hon. Minister the latest position in regard to providing WLL services throughout the country, and on what ground private operators are opposing this move?

SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN: I will require a separate notice for that because this question, if you look at it, only talks about MTNL's dues from the Dolphin area—Cellular. So, at this juncture, it is difficult for me to answer this question. If a separate notice on WLL comes, I will come with preparation and happily answer.

SHRI N. K. PREMACHANDRAN: Sir, the Cellular service, which has been started by the BSNL, got a good response in the State of Kerala and the demand is very huge. But, the SIM cards and units are not available. We have read in the newspapers that private companies are behind the artificial shortage of SIM cards. A huge response has come from consumers, especially a very good response has come from the State of Kerala. Has it come to the notice of the hon. Minister why such shortage is there?

SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN: Mr. Chairman, if you again permit me, I will try to answer this question in a general way because the question put up to me is, whether it is a fact that MTNL's mobile service Dolphin

consumers default. So, it has nothing to do with the BSNL Cellular service. At present, I am not prepared. But I can assure you that BSNL is not helping private operators by shortage of SIM cards. The BSNL has just started. If I would have to help private operators, I would not have entered into the market. Nobody forced BSNL to go into the market. So, when we entered into the market, we would like to dominate the market. We would like about 4 million customers in a year's time or so. The response to the BSNL's Cellular service—Cell-one -is very good. But, there are teething problems in the beginning. So, shortage of SIM cards in Kerala or elsewhere in the country, in no way, should be treated as a proof of helping private operators. If I have to help private operators, I would not have entered into the business. So, we have entered into business and we would like to take a substantial share in a competitive environment.

SHRI J. CHITHARANJAN: Mr. Chairman, the hon. Minister has replied that in order to collect the outstanding dues certain private agencies will be engaged. Sir, there is already a machinery set up in the MTNL to collect dues. Sir, the default has occurred just because of certain technical snags, as pointed out by the Minister. Therefore, if those technical snags are being removed, and if the same machinery is being utilised, you can collect the dues from the defaulters with the help of this machinery. Therefore, instead of engaging some other agency, why can't you think of that?

SHRI PRAMOD MAHAJAN: Sir, this is a suggestion for action. But, as I said earlier, one must understand that we should not be very touchy about deploying private agencies to collect our own dues. What is wrong in it? We want to collect our dues, and the MTNL's normal machinery is not used to do this thing. It is true that the software problem was a part of it. But the collection problem is also a part of it. So, we are trying to tackle both the problems, and as I said, hiring any private agency for security purpose, and hiring any private agency for billing purpose, should not be treated as privatisation, and as I assured, there is no question of privatisation. I think, this should be allowed, as long as MTNL gets its dues from the defaulting customers.

**422. [The Questioners (Shri Arjun Singh and Dr. T. Subbarami Reddy) were absent. For answer vide page 33-34]*